

STOPPING BULLYING AND RAISING  
RESPONSIBLE, CARING CHILDREN:  
A HANDOUT FOR PARENTS

What is bullying?

Hitting, name-calling, exclusion, or other behavior that is meant to hurt. Bullying is carried out by someone who has more power against someone who has less power.

Do we have to know that someone means to hurt someone else before we can discipline for behavior that hurts?

No. When we discourage all peer-to-peer aggression, we also deal with bullying.

What are the effects of bullying?

Bullying affects both targets and bullies. Targets of bullying are more likely to grow up depressed and anxious. Bullies are much more likely than nonbullies to become adult criminals.

Why not just tell kids to stand up for themselves or pretend it doesn't bother them?

They've most likely already tried both of these interventions before asking us for help. If these strategies worked, they would already have solved the problem. Bullying has much in common with sexual harassment, spousal abuse, and racism: There is an imbalance of power. The aggressor blames the target for causing or deserving the harassment. Targets often come to blame themselves.

What parenting styles lead to young people becoming (or not becoming) bullies?

There are many other factors outside the family, but families where discipline is inconsistent and where there is little warmth and adult attention are more likely to raise children who bully. Consistent, fair discipline teaches self-control and responsibility. Warmth and time spent together teach connection and empathy.

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What about factors outside the family?

The more violent television, violent movies, violent video games, and music glorifying violence kids are exposed to, the more likely they are to solve problems in violent ways. We can limit kids' exposure to all these media.

What parenting style has the best results?

Authoritative parents, who have clear rules and follow through on expectations and who show love and interest in the child's feelings, tend to raise the most confident, successful children. Authoritarian parents, who have clear (sometimes rigid) rules and who show little love or interest in their children, tend to raise children who either live by rules or rebel against them. Permissive parents, who give their children love and have inconsistent rules, tend to raise children who are confident and secure but who may have problems with self-control or with respecting the rights of others.

How can I set up a family discipline program that is consistent and effective?

It's best to start with no more than five specific house rules that all the adults in the home agree are important and that apply to everyone. Some examples of house rules are "No hitting or teasing," "Do your homework and your chores on time," and "Follow directions after one reminder without screaming or whining." Then make a list of all the privileges your children have, including TV, phone, rides, clothes of their choosing, video games, and other things you let them do or do for them. Take out of the list everything that has to be free for the child—those privileges, like sleeping in a bed or eating, that every child deserves no matter how he or she acts without having to earn them. List the other privileges—at least twelve—in order based on how much *you* would be unhappy if your child did not earn those privileges. Now you are ready to begin. After you explain the rules and the behavior system to them, every time children break a house

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rule they move down one level on the privilege chart. They can now have the privileges below that level but not the ones above. A laminated list of rules and an erasable marker are useful tools in making this clearer. For younger children (ages five to seven), allow them to earn back one level every two days based on behavior. For young people ages 8 and above, allow them to earn back one level each Friday based on behavior through the week. Privileges can be lost at any time but only earned back one at a time at these specified times. Avoid warning, threatening, begging, second chances, arguing, or using anger. Instead, calmly let your child lose privileges every time he or she breaks a house rule. Remember to give lots of positive attention and spend time playing with, reading with, and enjoying your child whether he or she is misbehaving or not. Love does not have to be earned.

What about spending time with kids? The more time you spend with them doing things you both enjoy, the closer you will be to them and the happier they will be. Schedule special times for each child and stick to the schedule. Cut back activities if necessary to make that happen.

What kinds of praise work best? Praise is important. General, nonspecific praise like "You're so smart" or "Good job" doesn't help young people see what they did right and may make them afraid to risk failure if they think they can only be smart when they do something right. I-message praise, such as "I'm so proud of you when you . . ." tells young people that they are responsible for our feelings and thus may lead to dependency or rebellion. Telling young people exactly what they did and what positive results

their actions have empowers them and helps them be proud of their own behavior: "I noticed you helped your brother get dressed for school. He was smiling after you did that"; "You studied the last three nights, and you got a 95 on this test"; "I saw you control yourself when Suzie yelled at you, and you stayed out of trouble."

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### **What about bullying prevention programs in schools?**

Research-based bullying prevention programs combine six basic strategies schoolwide:

1. Clear expectations and schoolwide consistent consequences for hurting others with words or actions
2. Positive staff-student communication
3. Staff spend time with students
4. School staff help aggressive youth change
5. Staff support targets of bullying
6. Staff help bystanders discourage bullying

**How can I talk with my child if she bullies someone else?** Help your child tell you exactly what she did, without excuses or blaming others. Remember that even if the other student involved did something, your child made a choice to do what she did. Encourage her to talk about how that behavior affected the other person. Help her find the goal she was trying to reach through hurting the other person: Did she want attention? Power? Fun? To be left alone? And help her find other ways to reach that goal without hurting others. **If** your child has been punished at school, it will probably not be necessary to punish again at home (unless the behavior was severe). Encourage your child to act differently next time.

**How can I support my child if he is bullied at school?** Avoid blaming your child for the harassment. Think twice before giving advice—your child may have already tried the strategies you are going to suggest. Get as much information as you can. Talk with your child's teacher, principal, or counselor, and ask him or her to help your child be safe. That intervention may include consequences for the bully, increased supervision, and helping your child make more friends if he is isolated.

Ask your child what he has already tried to resolve the problem. Praise for all the things he has tried. Give him permission to stop doing the things that haven't worked to stop the bullying. Encourage

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him to keep telling you and other adults. Help him to think about what has worked—or what *might* work. If your child is isolated, help him make connections through activities, hobbies, or clubs.

What if my child is in an abusive friendship with someone who hurts him or her? Both girls and boys sometimes get into friendships with someone who is a friend one day and mean the next, who talks behind their backs, and who makes them feel that this mean behavior is somehow their fault. The best way for young people to protect themselves from this hurt is to move on to other friendships, knowing that a real friend doesn't hurt you. Trudy Ludwig's wonderful book *My Secret Bully* is a great help in talking about this issue with young people.

How can I encourage my child to speak up about the bullying that he or she sees? Encourage your child to join with others in telling bullies

to stop, telling adults when they see bullying, and reaching out in friendship to isolated youth. Praise your children when they do these things. Remind them that they have the power to help.

For more information: See the excellent pamphlet *Bullying Is Not a Fact of Life* online at <http://www.mentalhealth.org/publications/allpubs/SVP-0052/>